The Wetlands of South San Francisco Bay: Past, Present, & Future

Historically land along the south shore of San Francisco Bay has been used for harvesting salt. This area is a naturally occurring marshland with ideal conditions for saltmaking. The area has more sun and less rain than areas on the peninsula to the west and north, and has consistent winds to help with evaporation.

Before and during Spanish colonization, the Ohlone people gathered salt from this region. By 1827 Jedidiah Smith noted a saltworks that belonged to Mission San Jose.

Miners used salt as part of a process to separate out silver ore, so with the discovery of the Comstock Lode in 1859 the demand for salt spiked as did salt production. There were 18 salt companies operating in the south bay by 1868.

Leslie Salt Company production, 1915 photographed by A. G. C. Hahn, originally part of San Mateo County exhibit at Panama Pacific International Exposition, 1915. http://www.tomruley.com/The_Peninsula/167-85.html

By the 1870s, areas of naturally evaporating salt were running out. Consequently salt producers began to build dikes and artificial ponds to expand their holdings. At the turn of the 20th century, Leslie Salt Company had consolidated salt production in the area.

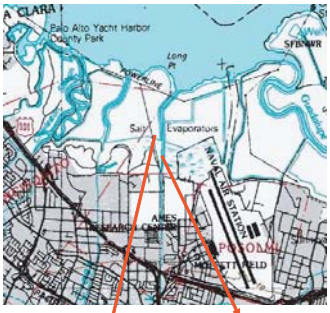
Moffett Field, 1938 Ames Image Library

In 1931, the US Navy purchased the land along the south shore that was to become the Naval Air Station Moffett Field. The Navy ran the base from 1933-1935. From 1935-1942, the US Army Air Corps operated the field, which became home of the west coast dirigibles (blimps). Control of the field was returned to the Navy 1942 - 1994. (Salt ponds can be seen beyond the landing strip in the 1938 image above.)

Ames was founded at Moffett Field on December 20, 1939 as an aircraft research laboratory run by the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA). In 1958 it became part of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Landsat 7 Enhanced Thematic Mapper
July 7, 1999
Distributed by US Geological Survey
www.usgs.gov

Aerial photo of NAS Moffett Field, circa 1948



Solar evaporation salt pond A2W owned by Cargill Salt, June 2002

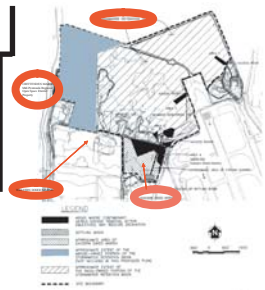
Stevens Creek running to the west of NASA Ames Research Center, June 2002

Border of salt evaporation pond A2W owned by Cargill Salt. Cargill purchased the ponds from Leslie Salt Company in 1978.

Cargill salt pond A2W, northwest of Moffett Field, June 2002

IKONOS browse image taken, April 17, 2001
Courtesy of Space Imaging www.spaceimaging.com

From 1953-1991 rainwater flushed PCBs, DDT, lead, zinc, TPH (total petroleum hydrocarbons, i.e., fuel or fuel components), VOCs (volatile organic compounds, e.g.from degreasing solvents, dry cleaning fluids), and SVOCs (semivolatile organic compounds) from Moffett Field into the base's eastern diked pond and the stormwater retention basin. Known as Site 25 in the map and aerial photo below, this part of the Moffett wetlands was declared a superfund site and placed on the EPA national priority list in 1987. The western diked marsh is not included as part of Site 25.



Site 25 Map from the proposed actions for Superfund Site clean-up, May 2002
http://www.efdsw.navfac.navy.mil/environmental/moffett.htm

Aerial view of Moffett Federal Airfield, 1995

The Naval Air Station, Moffett Field was closed as an active military base in July 1994, and the federal property was acquired by NASA Ames Research Center. NASA/Ames Research Center now operates the facility.

NASA has proposed the development of a research and development campus at Moffett Field. As of June 2002, Site 25 clean up is being planned by the Navy and USEPA. NASA intends continued use of Site 25 for flood control and storm water runoff. As part of Moffett Field, the area will remain a seasonal wetland.

Proposed plan for NASA Ames Research Park, http://researchpark.arc.nasa.gov/

On May 29, 2002, the largest wetland restoration plan in California history was announced, marking the return of 16,500 acres of evaporation ponds to tidal marsh and seasonal dry wetlands. For $100 million, Cargill Salt agreed to sell property in the San Francisco Bay area to the State of California and the federal government for habitat restoration. The evaporation ponds surrounding the Moffett wetlands are part of this sale. Expected to be a 20 year process, the stewards of the tidal marsh restoration are working to meet the Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals. (See www.sfei.org/sfbaygoals/)

Project supported by the Ecosystem Science & Technology Branch, Ames Research Center, and the NASA/ASEE Faculty Fellowship Program

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